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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a course at West Virginia University that teaches academic self-management to beginning university students who have learning disabilities or are otherwise at risk for academic failure. The course uses an integrated approach that emphasizes the development of college study skills, self-management skills, and academic problem-solving skills. The course also acquaints students with support services offered by the university. Titled "Psychology of Academic Self-Management," the three-credit course is taught by a course coordinator or graduate assistants and is staffed by two undergraduate teaching assistants who successfully completed the course the previous semester. For recruitment purposes, the course coordinator sends letters describing the course to eligible incoming freshmen prior to summer orientation sessions, and maintains contacts with academic advisors for referral of potential students. Two case studies are presented of students who attribute their success to the program. (JDD)

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EASING THE HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE TRANSITION FOR RURAL LEARNING DISABLED AND OTHER AT-RISK COLLEGE STUDENTS: A THREE CREDIT COURSE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Learning Disabilities Association of America
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INTRODUCTION

During the last decade colleges have been opening their doors to an ever increasing number of at risk or high risk students. Included in this population are learning disabled individuals. Of the freshmen entering college during the Fall of 1991, 2.2% were identified as learning disabled (Astin, 1991). Over one fourth of the entering freshmen indicated that they anticipated a need for remedial work in math and over ten percent suggested that they would need remedial assistance in science, english and foreign languages (Astin, 1991).

Institutions of higher learning have been admitting high risk students in order to stablize enrollments and to meet affirmative action goals (Abrams & Jernigan, 1984). However, college administrators have quickly learned that the admission of high risk students does not solve the above-mentioned problems; instead the admission of high risk students creates another problem that colleges have been fighting for years. That problem is retention rates. Students who come to college with deficiences in basic skills and a history of limited academic performance are prime drop-out candidates (Cope & Hannah, 1975). According to Abrams & Jernigan (1984) and Baldridge, Kemerer, and Green (1982), academic support services are an important factor in increasing the probability that high risk students will remain in college. A variety of such academic support services have been instituted at colleges across the United States. Learning centers and specialized learning labs are becoming commonplace at many colleges. Special programs have been developed at many colleges and universites just for learning disabled individuals. In addition, special courses have been designed to assist the high risk student to develop the necessary skills so that he/she can become an active participant in the learning process.

The importance of transforming the student from a passive learner to an active learner has been stressed by several researchers including Fox (1985), Helman and Solmlanko (1992), Nieves (1982) and Sherman (1985). It is apparent that the creation of an active learner involves more than just the provision of academic support services. High risk students including the learning disabled need support services; they need instruction in specific college level study skills to help them become effective and efficient students, but they also need more than just study skills. They need to realize that they are in control of their academic destiny. Students who reach that level of realization tend to attain higher levels of achievement (Sherman, 1985).

In the mid 1980's, West Virginia University realized the need for a specialized course to address the needs of

high risk students who were entering the university. The Department of Psychology was given the task to develop such a course. Under the direction of Redmon and Wylie (1985), a self-management and study skills training program was developed. From its early beginnings as a three credit, individualized training program for entering high risk freshmen, the course has evolved into a more in depth, multiple component program that emphasizes the instruction of specific study skills, the development of academic problem solving skills, the acquisition of time and self-management skills, and the development of an academic support network.

It's obvious that the high risk college student has many obstacles to overcome in order to achieve academic success. Some of the obstacles are easily detected. Long-term individual study problems, such as deficits in reading, written expression, and study skills, are easily singled out. Deficits in self-management and academic problem solving skills may not be as readily apparent when a student's academic record is reviewed, but those skills are also major obstacles that the high risk student must surmount. Thus the focus of the West Virginia University academic self-management program has switched from a study hall approach to an integrated approach that emphasizes the development of college study skills, self-management skills and academic problem solving skills.

GENERAL COURSE DESCRIPTION

Psychology of Academic Self-Management, referred to as Psych 25, is a three credit course for high risk students attending West Virginia University. The university is located in the rural Appalachian region, and many of the students attending the institution are from rural areas. However, the university also draws enrollment from suburban and urban areas across the United States. The course is designed to ease the high risk student's transition from the high school to the university setting. As a result, the course does not just focus on study skills instruction, but encompasses other skills necessary for high risk students to have a positive college experience.

High risk students are defined as entering freshmen with an ACT enhanced composite score or SAT equivalent score of 20 or less and/or a high school grade point average of 2.5 or less. In addition, underclassmen are labeled high risk if they meet one of the following requirements: a) have failed a course, b) are on academic probation, c) are returning from academic suspension. Specific recruitment procedures for the course are handled by the course coordinator who maintains close contacts with student academic advisors and sends letters describing the course to

eligible incoming freshmen prior to summer orientation sessions.

Four sections of the course are taught during the fall semester, and three are offered during the spring semester. Each course section is limited to an enrollment of twenty students. The sections are taught by the course coordinator or graduate assistants who participate in a pre-teaching training program and are closely monitored by the course coordinator. In addition, each course section is also staffed by two undergraduate teaching assistants, students who have successfully completed the course the previous semester. The undergraduate teaching assistants help with instructional duties and provide invaluable peer tutoring assistance.

SPECIFIC COURSE DESCRIPTION

During the first seven weeks of the course, the students are taught specific research-backed study skills designed for college students (Helman & Slomianko, 1992). These skills focus on making the student more effective and efficient at acquiring information through lectures and reading, organizing and synthesizing that information to enhance comprehension, and recalling that information as required at exam time. Once the skills are taught the students are expected to use the skills for the remainder of the semester in all of their courses. Individual consultation sessions are held with the course instructor during the final eight weeks of the semester to assure skill mastery as well as to monitor skill usage.

As students are being taught the specific study skills, they are also introduced to a bi-weekly written exercise known as a problem analysis. This activity requires the student to analyze his/her performance in each course in which they are enrolled. The focus of the task is to make students constantly aware of their academic situation and to help them to realize that they play an instrumental role in their academic destiny. The problem analysis for each course must contain three elements: a) a reporting of the student's current grade in the course and a discussion of the specific reasons why the student is receiving that grade--what they did or did not do to earn the current grade, b) a listing of the assignments in the course for the upcoming two weeks and a specific timetable for completion of the assignments as well as the scheduling of sessions for review activities, c) a listing of problem behaviors that are impacting the student's performance in the course and the naming of specific, concrete solutions to deal with the problem behaviors.

In addition to the study skills and the problem analysis exercises, students are taught time and

self-management skills through a hands-on activity. The self-management project consists of a seven week individual experiment that each student conducts. During the first two weeks, the students keep a log listing all of their daily activities. They must account for all 1440 minutes in a day. In addition, they maintain a separate study data log. In the study log they record the settings where each study session occurs, the length of the study session, and the quality of the study session. All of this baseline data is summarized and analyzed by the student with the end result being an individualized study plan developed by the student. In the plan the student sets long and short term goals related to study time and quality, manipulates study settings and study behaviors in an effort to achieve the goals, and designs a reward system to encourage desired study behaviors. The plan is then implemented and daily study activity data is collected over a five week period. The data is summarized weekly, and adjustments are made to the plan as necessary. At the conclusion of the five week intervention period, the student prepares a final report assessing the effectiveness of the self-management activity and discussing future self-management plans.

The final component of West Virginia University's academic self-management course is the personal improvement project, PIPs. This segment of the course is designed to acquaint students with the various support services that the university offers for its students. The services include a reading and study skills lab, a writing lab, a math lab, a foreign language lab, a residence hall learning center and tutoring program for freshmen and underclassmen, a career services center, student counseling services, a minority student support program, and disability services. Course instructors are also considered a valid support service. Over the course of the semester, the students are required to spend twelve hours outside of class utilizing one or more of the support services.

CASE STUDIES

Many success stories have evolved from the Psych 25 program. High risk students, including learning disabled individuals, have used the course as a springboard to academic success. Bryan and Amanda represent two of the learning disabled student success stories. Both freshmen students were enrolled in the course during the Fall 1991 semester, and both students eagerly agreed to share their stories.

Bryan is a 19-year-old freshman from the Mid-Atlantic region. He attended private schools second through twelth grades. In the private school setting, he became accustomed to a tremendous amount of individualized and small group instruction. Bryan describes himself as dyslexic. He

completed high school at the age of 19 with a 2.41 grade point average and an ACT composite score of 17. Bryan's parents suggested a small college, but Bryan had a desire to "try something bigger", so he enrolled at West Virginia University. He received information about the Psych 25 program through the mail before he arrived for the summer orientation program. Bryan registered for Psych 25 for the fall semester. In addition he enrolled in the following other courses: biology for majors, chemistry, math and communications. Bryan chose not to disclose his learning disability to the university, but he did report his disability to individual professors. He used private tutors and tutors obtained through the university residence hall learning centers program throughout the semester. He also implemented the various study and time management skills presented in the Psych 25 program. Bryan completed all his courses for the semester and compiled a 2.3 grade point average. Bryan attributed his success to the Psych 25 program. He found the study skills very useful especially since he no longer had the advantage of individualized instruction. He used the self-management skills to learn how to effectively plan a study schedule. He was able to plan study tasks on his own and get them done. In addition, the problem analysis helped him focus on what he had to do. He stated that the problem analysis activity made him feel like he was in control of his academic life. Bryan is serving as a Psych 25 undergraduate teaching assistant this semester. He is continuing to pursue a biology/pre-med major, and he's continuing to experience academic success.

Amanda is an 18-year-old freshman from the New England region. She was not identified as learning disabled until her sophomore year in high school. She has oral language processing deficits. Amanda attended public schools. She received a tremendous amount of academic support from her parents during her public education career. She finished high school with a 2.3 grade point average and an ACT composite score of 19. A student from Amanda's hometown recommended the Psych 25 program to her. In addition to Psych 25, she enrolled for the following courses for the fall semester: a child development and family studies course, two communication courses, an art history course, and a physical education course. Amanda admits that her initial reaction to classes at West Virginia University was one of frustration. She knew she was on her own without the strong parent support that she was accustomed to. She quickly learned to become her own advocate. With the support of the Psych 25 coordinator, Amanda learned to arrange for textbooks on tape, to obtain assistance from tutors, to take advantage of the university writing and reading and study skills labs, and to contact instructors about special testing arrangements. In addition, Amanda found the organizational study skills taught in Psych 25 to be very beneficial. She also derived benefits from the time and

self-management aspects of the course and found the problem solving aspect of the problem analysis very helpful. Amanda finished her first semester in college with a 2.8 grade point average. She is enrolled in courses for the spring semester and is once again taking the advocate role. She's obtained textbooks on tape, arranged for tutoring, and set up special testing arrangements. Her reaction to West Virginia University is no longer one of frustration. In Amanda's words, "I love it now. I've learned to do things on my own, and I've received good help from my professors."

SUMMARY

High risk college students including the learning disabled need not and should not have a negative academic experience in the college setting. Specialized courses can be designed to assist their transition from the high school to the university arena. If the specialized courses are to be effective, they must not just focus on improving study skills; they must also concentrate on other obstacles that high risk college students must surmount such as deficient self-management and academic problem solving skills. In addition, specialized courses should introduce students to support services that the university provides so that the students can develop their own support network that they can tap into during the course of their college career. The Psychology of Academic Self-Management course at West Virginia University has combined all of the necessary components into its curriculum. The course known to students as Psych 25 has successfully assisted many high risk college students including learning disabled students in their efforts to achieve academic independence and academic success.

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